The Pre-K to Workforce Pipeline

Washington State Must Start Early To Build
A Highly-Skilled Workforce

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Washington State business leaders know that we need a highly-skilled workforce to compete in the global marketplace. What might not be quite so obvious is that we must start early—focusing on young children—to achieve the workforce we need.

Research has demonstrated that high-quality public pre-Kindergarten programs can help children arrive at school ready to learn and reduce the likelihood that they will be held back in school which is hard on kids, families, schools and taxpayers. For example, children held back are much more likely to eventually drop out of school. Reducing the number of children held back in school not only benefits children, but saves taxpayers money as well. In 2013, approximately 2,000 Washington Kindergarten students were held back. At an average cost of about $5,700 per student, the state is spending over $11 million per year in additional costs for children repeating a year of Kindergarten. If providing high-quality pre-K to Washington’s young children could cut the number of children held back in Kindergarten by even 25 percent, the state could save nearly $3 million every year.

High-quality pre-K has other short- and long-term benefits for young people and our economy, including improved math and reading scores, reduced need for special education, and increased likelihood of graduating from high school. Additionally, it can lead to higher wages and better job outcomes for children, as well as savings for taxpayers. ReadyNation estimates that for every dollar invested in pre-K, the state will save $7 in the long term.

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education, and better high school graduation rates. Pre-K's outcomes can yield, on average, a net return of over $26,000 for every child served.

To obtain these beneficial results, pre-K must be high quality. Washington’s publicly funded state pre-K, the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), meets nine of the 10 quality benchmarks developed by the National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER). However, the “Essential Elements of High-Quality Early Learning” developed at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, outlines other research-supported elements that Washington should meet in order to reap the full benefits pre-K can deliver. For example, programs of 6 to 6.5 hours per day have been shown to be more effective than those of 2.5 to 3.0 hours per day. Among other quality elements are a proven curriculum delivered with fidelity by lead teachers with BA degrees and early learning credentials, who are adequately compensated. Other elements include strong political leadership, and a compelling vision and strategy championed by education leaders. Finally, ongoing professional development and assessments at every level using valid data need to be part of the continuous quality improvement systems.

**Bottom Line**

Washington State business leaders recognize that continually enhancing the quality of the state ECEAP pre-K program and ensuring that more children have access to this quality program are solid investments in our state’s future economic success. By aspiring to be exemplary, Washington can achieve the full potential of early childhood education, reaping its benefits for our children and our state economy.